

THE PSYCHOPATH TEST

A Journey Through the Madness Industry

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THE MISSING PART OF THE PUZZLE REVEALED

This is a story about madness. It begins with a curious encounter at a Costa Coffee in Bloomsbury, Central London. It was the Costa where the neurologists tended to go, the University College London Institute of Neurology being just around the corner. And here was one now, turning onto Southampton Row, waving a little self-consciously at me. Her name was Deborah Talmi. She looked like someone who spent her days in laboratories and wasn't used to peculiar rendezvous with journalists in cafés and finding herself at the heart of baffling mysteries. She had brought someone with her. He was a tall, unshaven, academic-looking young man. They sat down.

"I'm Deborah," she said.

"I'm Jon," I said.

"I'm James," he said.

"So," I asked, "did you bring it?"

Deborah nodded. She silently slid a package across the table. I opened it and turned it over in my hands.

"It's quite beautiful," I said.

Last July, Deborah received a strange package in the mail. It was waiting for her in her pigeonhole. It was postmarked *Göteborg, Sweden*. Someone had written on the padded envelope: *Will tell you more when I return!* But whoever had sent it to her didn't leave a name.

The package contained a book. It was only forty-two pages long, twenty-one of which—every other page—were completely blank, but everything about it—the paper, the illustrations, the typeface—looked very expensively produced. The cover was a delicate, eerie picture of two disembodied hands drawing each other. Deborah recognized it to

be a reproduction of M. C. Escher's *Drawing Hands*.

The author was a "Joe K" (a reference to Kafka's Josef K., maybe, or an anagram of "joke"?) and the title was *Being or Nothingness*, which was some kind of allusion to Sartre's 1943 essay, *Being and Nothingness*. Someone had carefully cut out with scissors the page that would have listed the publishing and copyright details, the ISBN, etc., so there were no clues there. A sticker read: *Warning! Please study the letter to Professor Hofstadter before you read the book. Good Luck!*

Deborah leafed through it. It was obviously some kind of puzzle waiting to be solved, with cryptic verse and pages where words had been cut out, and so on. She looked again at the *Will tell you more when I return!* One of her colleagues was visiting Sweden, and so even though he wasn't normally the sort of person to send out mysterious packages, the most logical explanation was that it had come from him.

But then he returned, and she asked him, and he said he didn't know anything about it.

Deborah was intrigued. She went on the Internet. And it was then she discovered she wasn't alone.

"Were the recipients all neurologists?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "Many were neurologists. But one was an astrophysicist from Tibet. Another was a religious scholar from Iran."

"They were all academics," said James.

They had all received the package the exact same way Deborah had—in a padded envelope from Gothenburg upon which was written *Will tell you more when I return!* They had gathered on blogs and message boards and were trying to crack the code.

Maybe, suggested one recipient, the book should be read as a Christian allegory, "even from the enigmatic *Will tell you more when I return!* (Clearly a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus). The author/authors seem to be contradicting Sartre's atheist 'Being AND Nothingness' (not B OR N)."

A researcher in perceptual psychology named Sarah Allred agreed: "I have a vague suspicion this is going to end up being some viral

marketing/advertising play by some sort of religious organization in which academics/intellectuals/scientists/philosophers will come off looking foolish.”

To others this seemed unlikely: “The expensiveness factor rules out the viral theory unless the campaign is counting on their carefully selected targets to ponder about the mysterious book online.”

Most of the recipients believed the answer lay, intriguingly, with them. *They* had been handpicked to receive the package. There was clearly a pattern at work, but what was it? Had they all attended the same conference together years ago or something? Maybe they were being headhunted for a top position in some secretive business?

“First one to crack the code gets the job so to speak?” wrote one Australian recipient.

What seemed obvious was that a brilliant person or organization with ties to Gothenburg had devised a puzzle so complex that even clever academics like them couldn’t decipher it. Perhaps it couldn’t be decoded because the code was incomplete. Maybe there was a missing piece. Someone suggested “holding the letter closely over a lamp or try the iodine vapor test on it. There may be some secret writing on it in another type of ink.”

But there didn’t turn out to be any secret writing.

They threw up their hands in defeat. If this was a puzzle that academics couldn’t solve, maybe they should bring in someone more brutish, like a private investigator or a journalist. Deborah asked around. Which reporter might be tenacious and intrigued enough to engage with the mystery?

They went through a few names.

And then Deborah’s friend James said, “What about Jon Ronson?”

On the day I received Deborah’s e-mail inviting me to the Costa Coffee I was in the midst of quite a bad anxiety attack. I had been interviewing a man named Dave McKay. He was the charismatic leader of a small Australian religious group called The Jesus Christians and had recently suggested to his members that they each donate their spare kidney to a stranger. Dave and I had got on pretty

well at first—he'd seemed engagingly eccentric and I was consequently gathering good material for my story, enjoyably nutty quotes from him, etc.—but when I proposed that group pressure, emanating from Dave, was perhaps the reason why some of his more vulnerable members might be choosing to give up a kidney, he exploded. He sent me a message saying that to teach me a lesson he was putting the brakes on an imminent kidney donation. He would let the recipient die and her death would be on my conscience.

I was horrified for the recipient and also quite pleased that Dave had sent me such a mad message that would be good for my story. I told a journalist that Dave seemed quite psychopathic (I didn't know a thing about psychopaths but I assumed that that was the sort of thing they might do). The journalist printed the quote. A few days later Dave e-mailed me: "I consider it defamatory to state that I am a psychopath. I have sought legal advice. I have been told that I have a strong case against you. Your malice toward me does not allow you to defame me."

This was what I was massively panicking about on the day Deborah's e-mail to me arrived in my in-box.

"What was I *thinking*?" I said to my wife, Elaine. "I was just enjoying being interviewed. I was just enjoying talking. And now it's all fucked. Dave McKay is going to sue me."

"What's happening?" yelled my son Joel, entering the room. "Why is everyone shouting?"

"I made a silly mistake. I called a man a psychopath, and now he's angry," I explained.

"What's he going to do to us?" said Joel.

There was a short silence.

"Nothing," I said.

"But if he's not going to do anything to us, why are you worried?" said Joel.

"I'm just worried that I've made him angry," I said. "I don't like to make people upset or angry. That's why I'm sad."

"You're lying," said Joel, narrowing his eyes. "I *know* you don't mind making people angry or upset. What is it that you aren't telling me?"

"I've told you everything," I said.

"Is he going to attack us?" said Joel.

"No!" I said. "No, no! That definitely won't happen!"

"Are we in danger?" yelled Joel.

"He's not going to attack us," I yelled. "He's just going to sue us. He just wants to take away my money."

"Oh God," said Joel.

I sent Dave an e-mail apologizing for calling him psychopathic.

"Thank you, Jon," he replied right away. "My respect for you has risen considerably. Hopefully if we should ever meet again we can do so as something a little closer to what might be called friends."

"And so," I thought, "there was me once again worrying about nothing."

I checked my unread e-mails and found the one from Deborah Talmi. She said she and many other academics around the world had received a mysterious package in the mail. She'd heard from a friend who had read my books that I was the sort of journalist who might enjoy odd whodunits. She ended with, "I hope I've conveyed to you the sense of weirdness that I feel about the whole thing, and how alluring this story is. It's like an adventure story, or an alternative reality game, and we're all pawns in it. By sending it to researchers, they have invoked the researcher in me, but I've failed to find the answer. I hope very much that you'll take it up."

Now, in the Costa Coffee, she glanced over at the book, which I was turning over in my hands.

"In essence," she said, "someone is trying to capture specific academics' attention to something in a very mysterious way and I'm curious to know why. I think it's too much of an elaborate campaign for it to be just a private individual. The book is trying to tell us something. But I don't know what. I would love to know who sent it to me, and why,

but I have no investigative talents.”

“Well . . .” I said.

I fell silent and gravely examined the book. I sipped my coffee. “I’ll give it a try,” I said.

I told Deborah and James that I’d like to begin my investigation by looking around their workplaces. I said I was keen to see the pigeonhole where Deborah had first discovered the package. They covertly shared a glance to say, “That’s an odd place to start but who dares to second-guess the ways of the great detectives?”

Their glance may not, actually, have said that. It might instead have said, “Jon’s investigation could not benefit in any serious way from a tour of our offices and it’s slightly strange that he wants to do it. Let’s hope we haven’t picked the wrong journalist. Let’s hope he isn’t some kind of a weirdo, or has a private agenda for wanting to see inside our buildings.”

If their glance did say that, they were correct: I did have a private agenda for wanting to see inside their buildings.

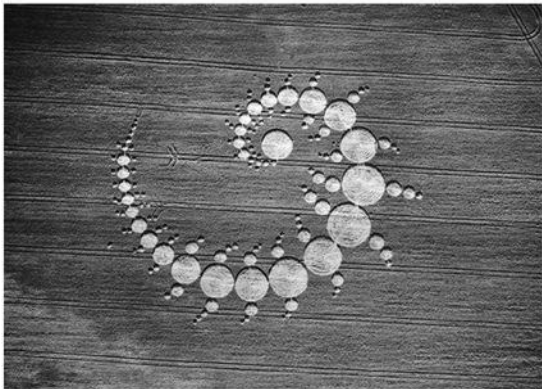
James’s department was a crushingly unattractive concrete slab just off Russell Square, the University College London school of psychology. Fading photographs on the corridor walls from the 1960s and 1970s showed children strapped to frightening-looking machines, wires dangling from their heads. They smiled at the camera in uncomprehending excitement as if they were at the beach.

A stab had clearly once been made at de-uglifying these public spaces by painting a corridor a jaunty yellow. This was because, it turned out, babies come here to have their brains tested and someone thought the yellow might calm them. But I couldn’t see how. Such was the oppressive ugliness of this building it would have been like sticking a red nose on a cadaver and calling it Ronald McDonald.

I glanced into offices. In each a neurologist or psychologist was hunkered down over their desk, concentrating hard on something brain-related. In one room, I learned, the field of interest was a man

from Wales who could recognize all his sheep as individuals but couldn't recognize human faces, not even his wife, not even himself in the mirror. The condition is called prosopagnosia— face blindness. Sufferers are apparently forever inadvertently insulting their workmates and neighbors and husbands and wives by not smiling back at them when they pass them on the street, and so on. People can't help taking offense even if they consciously know the rudeness is the fault of the disorder and not just haughtiness. Bad feelings can spread.

In another office a neurologist was studying the July 1996 case of a doctor, a former RAF pilot, who flew over a field in broad daylight, turned around, flew back over it fifteen minutes later, and there, suddenly, was a vast crop circle. It was as if it had just *materialized*.



The Julia Set.

It covered ten acres and consisted of 151 separate circles. The circle, dubbed the Julia Set, became the most celebrated in crop circle history. T-shirts and posters were printed. Conventions were

organized. The movement had been dying off—it had become increasingly obvious that crop circles were built not by extraterrestrials but by conceptual artists in the dead of night using planks of wood and string—but this one had appeared from nowhere in the fifteen-minute gap between the pilot's two journeys over the field.

The neurologist in this room was trying to work out why the pilot's brain had failed to spot the circle the first time around. It had been there all along, having been built the previous night by a group of conceptual artists known as Team Satan using planks of wood and string.

In a third office I saw a woman with a *Little Miss Brainy* book on her shelf. She seemed cheerful and breezy and good-looking.

"Who's that?" I asked James.

"Essi Viding," he said.

"What does she study?" I asked.

"Psychopaths," said James.

I peered in at Essi. She spotted us, smiled and waved.

"That must be dangerous," I said.

"I heard a story about her once," said James. "She was interviewing a psychopath. She showed him a picture of a frightened face and asked him to identify the emotion. He said he didn't know what the emotion was but it was the face people pulled just before he killed them."

I continued down the corridor. Then I stopped and glanced back at Essi Viding. I'd never really thought much about psychopaths before that moment, and I wondered if I should try to meet some. It seemed extraordinary that there were people out there whose neurological condition, according to James's story, made them so terrifying, like a wholly malevolent space creature from a sci-fi movie. I vaguely remembered hearing psychologists say there was a preponderance of psychopaths at the top—in the corporate and political worlds—a clinical absence of empathy being a benefit in those environments. Could that really be true? Essi waved at me again. And I decided, no, it would be a mistake to start meddling in the world of psychopaths, an

especially big mistake for someone like me, who suffers from a massive surfeit of anxiety. I waved back and continued down the corridor.

Deborah's building, the University College London Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging, was just around the corner on Queen Square. It was more modern and equipped with Faraday cages and fMRI scanners operated by geeky-looking technicians wearing comic-book T-shirts. Their nerdy demeanors made the machines seem less intimidating.

"Our goal," said the center's website, "is to understand how thought and perception arise from brain activity, and how such processes break down in neurological and psychiatric disease."

We reached Deborah's pigeonhole. I scrutinized it.

"Okay," I said. "Right."

I stood nodding for a moment. Deborah nodded back. We looked at each other.

Now was surely the time to reveal to her my secret agenda for wanting to get inside their buildings. It was that my anxiety levels had gone through the roof those past months. It wasn't normal. Normal people definitely didn't feel this panicky. Normal people definitely didn't feel like they were being electrocuted from the inside by an unborn child armed with a miniature Taser, that they were being prodded by a wire emitting the kind of electrical charge that stops cattle from going into the next field. And so my plan all day, ever since the Costa Coffee, had been to steer the conversation to the subject of my overanxious brain and maybe Deborah would offer to put me in an fMRI scanner or something. But she'd seemed so delighted that I'd agreed to solve the *Being or Nothingness* mystery I hadn't so far had the heart to mention my flaw, lest it spoil the mystique.

Now was my last chance. Deborah saw me staring at her, poised to say something important.

"Yes?" she said.

There was a short silence. I looked at her.

"I'll let you know how I get on," I said.

The six a.m. discount Ryanair flight to Gothenburg was cramped and claustrophobic. I tried to reach down into my trouser pocket to retrieve my notepad so I could write a to-do list, but my leg was impossibly wedged underneath the tray table that was piled high with the remainder of my snack-pack breakfast. I needed to plan for Gothenburg. I really could have done with my notepad. My memory isn't what it used to be. Quite frequently these days, in fact, I set off from my home with an excited, purposeful expression and after a while I slow my pace to a stop and just stand there looking puzzled. In moments like that everything becomes dreamlike and muddled. My memory will probably go altogether one day, just like my father's is, and there will be no books to write then. I really need to accumulate a nest egg.

I tried to reach down to scratch my foot. I couldn't. It was trapped. It was fucking trapped. It was *fucking* . . .

"YEAL!" I involuntarily yelled. My leg shot upward, hitting the tray table. The passenger next to me gave me a startled look. I had just let out an *unintentional shriek*. I stared straight ahead, looking shocked but also slightly awed. I didn't realize that such mysterious, crazy noises existed within me.

I had a lead in Gothenburg, the name and business address of a man who might know the identity or identities of "Joe K." His name was Petter Nordlund. Although none of the packages sent to the academics contained any leads—no names of possible authors or distributors—somewhere, buried deep within the archive of a Swedish library, I had found "Petter Nordlund" referenced as the English translator of *Being or Nothingness*. A Google search revealed nothing more about him, only the address of a Gothenburg company, BIR, that he was somehow involved in.

If, as the book's recipients suspected, a team of clever puzzlemakers was behind this expensive, enigmatic campaign for reasons not yet established (religious propaganda? viral marketing? headhunting?), Petter Nordlund was my only way in. But he didn't know

I was coming. I'd been afraid he'd go to ground if he did. Or maybe he'd tip off whichever shadowy organization was behind *Being or Nothingness*. Maybe they'd try to stop me in some way I couldn't quite visualize. Whatever, I determined that doorstepping Petter Nordlund was the shrewdest course of action. It was a gamble. The whole journey was a gamble. Translators often work at a great distance from their clients, and Petter Nordlund might well have known nothing at all.

Some recipients had suggested that *Being or Nothingness* was a puzzle that couldn't be decoded because it was incomplete, and after studying the book for a week, I'd come to agree. Each page seemed to be a riddle with a solution that was just out of reach.

A note at the beginning claimed that the manuscript had been "found" in the corner of an abandoned railway station: "It was lying in the open, visible to all, but I was the only one curious enough to pick it up."

What followed were elliptical quotations:

My thinking is muscular.

Albert Einstein

I am a strange loop.

Douglas Hofstadter

Life is meant to be a joyous adventure.

Joe K

The book had only twenty-one pages with text, but some pages contained just one sentence. Page 18, for instance, read simply: "The sixth day after I stopped writing the book I sat at B's place and wrote the book."

And all of this was very expensively produced, using the highest-quality paper and inks—there was a full-color, delicate reproduction of a butterfly on one page—and the endeavor must have cost someone or a group of people an awful lot of money.

The missing piece hadn't turned out to be secret writing in invisible ink, but there was another possibility. On page 13 of every copy a hole had been assiduously cut out. Some words were missing. Was the solution to the mystery somehow connected to those missing words?

I picked up a rental car at Gothenburg airport. The smell of it—the smell of a newly cleaned rental car—never fails to bring back happy memories of past sleuthing adventures. There were the weeks I spent trailing the conspiracy theorist David Icke around as he hypothesized his theory that the secret rulers of the world were giant, blood-drinking, child-sacrificing pedophile lizards that had adopted human form. That was a good story. And it began, as this one was, with the smell of a newly cleaned rental car.

The SatNav took me past the Liseberg funfair, past the stadium where Madonna was due to play the next night, and on toward the business district. I imagined Petter Nordlund's office would be located there, but instead the SatNav told me to take a sharp, unexpected left and I found myself bouncing up a tree-lined residential street toward a giant, white, square, clapboard house.

This was, it told me, my destination.

I walked to the front door and rang the buzzer. A woman in jogging pants answered.

"Is this Petter Nordlund's office?" I asked her.

"This is his home," she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said. "Is he here?"

"He's with patients today," she said. She had an American accent.

"He's a doctor?" I asked.

"A psychiatrist," she said.

We stood on her doorstep and talked for a while. She said her name was Lily and she was Petter's wife. They had been childhood sweethearts (he went to school in America) and had been considering settling in her home state of California, but then Petter's uncle died and he inherited this huge house and they just couldn't resist.

Petter, Lily said, was not only a translator but a highly successful psychiatrist. (I later read his LinkedIn page that said he worked with schizophrenics and psychotics and OCD sufferers, and had also been a “protein chemist” and an advisor to both an “international investment company” and a “Cambridge biotech company” specializing in something called “therapeutic peptide discovery and development.”) He was working in a clinic two hours outside Gothenburg, she said, and, no, there was no point in my driving over there. They would never let me in without the proper accreditation.

“I can’t even get ahold of him when he’s with patients,” she said. “It’s very intense.”

“Intense in what way?” I asked.

“I don’t even know that!” she said. “He’ll be back in a few days. If you’re still in Gothenburg, you’re welcome to try again.” Lily paused. “So, why are you here? Why do you want to see my husband?”

“He translated a very intriguing book,” I said, “called *Being or Nothingness*. I’ve become so fascinated by the book I wanted to meet him and find out who his employer was and why it was written.”

“Oh,” she said. She sounded surprised.

“Do you know *Being or Nothingness*?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she said. She paused. “I . . . Yeah. I know which book you’re talking about. I . . . He translates several things. For companies. And that was . . .” She trailed off. Then she said, “We don’t get into each other’s work. I don’t even pay attention to what he’s doing, quite honestly! I know he’s very much into molecular something, but I don’t understand it. Sometimes he says, ‘I’ve just translated this for some company’ and if it’s in Swedish, or something, I don’t understand it so I really don’t try and look into his work.”

“Anyway, it was lovely talking to you,” I said. “I’ll pop back in a few days?”

“Sure,” said Lily. “Sure.”

The days that followed passed slowly. I lay in my hotel room and watched the kind of strange European TV that would probably make perfect sense if I understood the language, but because I didn’t, the

programs just seemed dreamlike and baffling. In one studio show a group of Scandinavian academics watched as one of them poured liquid plastic into a bucket of cold water. It solidified, they pulled it out, handed it around the circle, and, as far as I could tell, intellectualized on its random misshapeness. I phoned home but my wife didn't answer. It crossed my mind that she might be dead. I panicked. Then it turned out that she wasn't dead. She had just been at the shops. I have panicked unnecessarily in all four corners of the globe. I took a walk. When I returned, there was a message waiting for me. It was from Deborah Talmi, the neurologist who had first approached me. A suspect had emerged. Could I call her?

The suspect, I discovered to my annoyance, wasn't in Sweden. He was in Bloomington, Indiana. His name was Levi Shand and he had just gone online to post the most implausible story about his involvement in *Being or Nothingness*.

Levi Shand's story, Deborah told me, went something like this: He was a student at Indiana University. He'd been driving aimlessly around town when he happened to notice a large brown box sitting in the dirt underneath a railway bridge. So he pulled over to have a closer look at it.

The box was unmarked and noticeably clean, as if it had only recently been dumped there. Even though Levi was nervous about opening it—anything could be in there, from a million dollars to a severed head—he plucked up the courage, and discovered eight pristine copies of *Being or Nothingness*.

He read the stickers on each: *Warning! Please study the letter to Professor Hofstadter before you read the book. Good Luck!* and was intrigued. Because he knew who Professor Hofstadter was, and where he lived.

"I'm not familiar with Professor Hofstadter," I said to Deborah. "I know there are references to him scattered all over *Being or Nothingness*. But I couldn't work out if he's a real person or a fictional character. Is

he well known?"

"He wrote *Gödel, Escher, Bach!*" she replied, surprised by my lack of knowledge. "It was momentous."

I didn't reply.

"If you're a geek," sighed Deborah, "and you're just discovering the Internet, and especially if you're a boy, *Gödel, Escher, Bach* would be like your Bible. It was about how you can use Gödel's mathematic theories and Bach's canons to make sense of the experience of consciousness. Lots of young guys really like it. It's very playful. I haven't read it in its entirety but it's on my bookshelf."

Hofstadter, she said, had published it in the late 1970s. It was lauded. It won a Pulitzer. It was filled with brilliant puzzles and wordplay and meditations on the meaning of consciousness and artificial intelligence. It was the kind of book—like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* or *A Brief History of Time*—that everybody wanted on their shelves but few were clever enough to really understand.

Even though the world had been at Hofstadter's feet in 1979, he had retreated from it, and had instead spent the past three decades working quietly as a professor of cognitive science at Indiana University. But he was well known among the students. He had a shock of silver-white hair like Andy Warhol's and a huge house on the edge of campus which was where—Levi Shand's story continued—the young student now drove with the intention of presenting Hofstadter with the eight copies of *Being or Nothingness* he had found in the box underneath the railway bridge.

"A railway bridge," I said to Deborah. "Have you noticed the parallel? In that covering letter to Douglas Hofstadter, the writer talks about finding some old typewritten pages carelessly thrown in the corner of an abandoned railroad station. And now Levi Shand has found some copies of *Being or Nothingness* thrown underneath a railway bridge."

"You're right!" said Deborah.

"So what does Levi Shand say happened when he went to Hofstadter's house to deliver the books?" I asked.

"He says he knocked on Hofstadter's door and it swung open to reveal to his astonishment a harem of beautiful French women. And

standing in the midst of the harem was Hofstadter himself. He invited the openmouthed young student inside, took the books, thanked him, and showed him to the door again.”

And that, Deborah said, was the end of Levi Shand’s story.

We fell into a puzzled silence.

“A harem of beautiful French women?” I said.

“I don’t believe the story,” she said.

“It doesn’t seem plausible,” I said. “I wonder if I can get Levi Shand on the phone.”

“I’ve done some research on him,” Deborah said. “He’s got a Facebook page.”

“Oh, okay,” I said. “I’ll contact him through that, then.” There was a silence.

“Deborah?” I said.

“I don’t think he exists,” Deborah said suddenly.

“But he’s got a Facebook page,” I said.

“With three hundred American friends who look the part,” Deborah said.

“You think . . . ?” I said.

“I think someone has created a convincing Facebook persona for Levi Shand,” Deborah said.

I took this possibility in.

“Have you thought about his name?” Deborah asked.

“Levi Shand?”

“Haven’t you worked it out?” she said. “It’s an anagram.”

I fell silent.

“ ‘ Lavish End’!” I suddenly exclaimed.

“No,” said Deborah.

I got out a piece of paper.

“ ‘ Devil Has N’ . . . ?” I asked after a while.

“ ‘ Live Hands,’” said Deborah. “It’s an anagram of ‘Live Hands.’”

“Oh, okay,” I said.

“Like the drawing on the cover of *Being or Nothingness*,” prompted Deborah. “Two hands drawing each other . . . ?”

“So if Levi Shand doesn’t exist,” I said, “who created him?”

“I think they’re all Hofstadter,” said Deborah. “Levi Shand. Petter

Nordlund. I think they're *all Douglas Hofstadter.*"

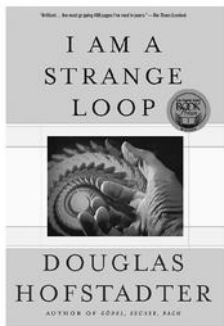
I went for a walk through Gothenburg, feeling quite annoyed and disappointed that I'd been hanging around here for days when the culprit was probably an eminent professor some four thousand miles away at Indiana University. Deborah had offered me supplementary circumstantial evidence to back her theory that the whole puzzle was a product of Douglas Hofstadter's impish mind. It was, she said, exactly the sort of playful thing he might do. And being the author of an international bestseller, he would have the financial resources to pull it off. Plus he was no stranger to Sweden; he had lived there in the mid-1960s. Furthermore, *Being or Nothingness* looked like a Hofstadter book. The clean white cover was reminiscent of the cover of Hofstadter's follow-up to *Gödel, Escher, Bach*—the 2007 book *I Am a Strange Loop*.

True, the creation of a fake Indiana University student with a fake Facebook page and an unlikely tale about a harem of beautiful French women was an odd addition, but it would do no good to second-guess the motives of a brilliant man like Hofstadter.

Furthermore, Deborah believed she had solved the book's puzzle. Yes, there was a missing piece, but it didn't take the form of invisible ink or significant words cut out of page 13. It was, she said, the way the book had revealed an inherent narcissism in its recipients.



Being or Nothingness, and the package it came in, photographed by a recipient, Eric Rauchway, professor of history at the University of California, Davis, and reproduced with his permission.



“That’s what *I Am a Strange Loop* is about,” said Deborah. “It’s about how we spend our lives self-referencing, over and over, in a kind of strange loop. Now lots of people are asking themselves, ‘Why was I selected to receive this book?’ They aren’t talking about the *book* or the *message*. They’re talking about *themselves*. So *Being or Nothingness* has created a strange loop of people and it is a vessel for them to self-reference.” She paused. “I think that’s Hofstadter’s message.”

It was a compelling theory, and I continued to believe this might be the solution to the riddle right up until the moment, an hour later, I had a Skype video conversation with Levi Shand, who, it was soon revealed, wasn’t an invention of Douglas Hofstadter’s but an actual student from Indiana University.

He was a handsome young man with black hair, doleful eyes, and a messy student bedroom. He had been easy to track down. I e-mailed him via his Facebook page. He got back to me straightaway (he’d been online at the time) and within seconds we were face-to-face.

He told me it was all true. He really did find the books in a box under

a railway viaduct and Douglas Hofstadter really did have a harem of French women living at his home.

“Tell me exactly what happened when you visited him,” I said.

“I was really nervous,” Levi said, “given his prominence on the cognitive science scene. A beautiful young French girl answered the door. She told me to wait. I looked through into the next room, and there were more beautiful French girls in there.”

“How many in total?” I asked.

“There were at least six of them,” said Levi. “They had brown hair, blond hair, all standing there between the kitchen and the dining room. All of them stunningly beautiful.”

“Is this *true*?” I asked him.

“Well, they might have been Belgian,” said Levi.

“What happened then?” I asked.

“Professor Hofstadter came out from the kitchen,” he said, “looking thin but healthy. Charismatic. He took the books, thanked me, and I left. And that’s it.”

“And every word of this is true?” I asked.

“Every word,” said Levi.

But something didn’t feel right. Levi’s story, and indeed Deborah’s theory, worked only if Douglas Hofstadter was some kind of playful, dilettantish prankster, and nothing I could find suggested he was. In 2007, for example, Deborah Solomon of *The New York Times* asked him some slightly facetious questions and his replies revealed him to be a serious, quite impatient man:

Q. You first became known in 1979, when you published “Gödel, Escher, Bach,” a campus classic, which finds parallels between the brains of Bach, M. C. Escher and the mathematician Kurt Gödel. In your new book, “I Am a Strange Loop,” you seem mainly interested in your own brain.

A. This book is much straighter. It’s less crazy. Less daring, maybe.

Q. You really know how to plug a book.

A. Well, O.K., I don't know. Questions of consciousness and soul—that is what the new book was motivated by.

Q. Your entry in Wikipedia says that your work has inspired many students to begin careers in computing and artificial intelligence.

A. I have no interest in computers. The entry is filled with inaccuracies, and it kind of depresses me.

And so on. Hofstadter's work, I learned, was informed by two neurological tragedies. When he was twelve, it became clear that his young sister Molly was unable to speak or understand language: "I was very interested already in how things in my mind worked," he told *Time* magazine in 2007. "When Molly's unfortunate plight became apparent, it all started getting connected to the physical world. It really made you think about the brain and the self, and how the brain determines who the person is."

And then in 1993 his wife, Carol, died, suddenly, of a brain tumor. Their children were two and five. He was left overwhelmed with grief. In *I Am a Strange Loop* he consoles himself with the thought that she lived on in his brain: "I believe that there is a trace of her 'I,' her interiority, her inner light, however you want to phrase it, that remains inside me," he told *Scientific American* in 2007, "and the trace that remains is a valid trace of her self—her soul, if you wish. I have to emphasize that the sad truth of the matter is, of course, that whatever persists in me is a very feeble copy of her. It's reduced, a sort of low-resolution version, coarsegrained. . . . Of course it doesn't remove the sting of death. It doesn't say, 'Oh, well, it didn't matter that she died because she lives on just fine in my brain.' Would that it were. But, anyway, it is a bit of a consolation."

None of this painted a picture of a man who might have a harem of French women and a propensity to create a complicated, odd conspiracy involving posting dozens of copies of strange books, anonymously, to academics across the world.

I wrote him an e-mail, asking him if Levi Shand's story about the box under the bridge and the harem of French women was true, and then I went for a walk. When I returned, this was waiting for me in my in-box:

Dear Mr. Ronson,

I have nothing to do with *Being or Nothingness* except that I'm mentioned in it. I am just an "innocent victim" of the project.

Yes, Mr. Shand came to my house and delivered a few copies of the odd book, but the rest of his story is sheer fabrication. My daughter was having her French lesson with her French tutor in the living room, so perhaps Mr. Shand espied the two of them and heard them speaking French. Also, I speak Italian at home with my kids, and for all I know, Mr. Shand may have mistaken the sound of Italian for French. The point is, there was certainly no "house filled with beautiful French women"—that's utter rubbish. He wanted to make his mission sound mysterious and titillating.

It's a shame that people do this kind of thing and post it on the Web.

Sincerely, Douglas Hofstadter

I e-mailed back. Much of Levi Shand's tale didn't ring true, I said, not only the business of the harem but also the story of how he found the box underneath the railway viaduct. Was it possible that Levi Shand was in fact the author of *Being or Nothingness*?

He replied:

Levi Shand is certainly not the author of the small white book. I have been sent about 80 copies (70 in English, 10 in Swedish) by its author. They sit untouched in my office. Before the book existed, I received a series of extremely cryptic postcards, all in Swedish (all of which I read, although not carefully, and none of which made the least sense at all). People who are normal (i.e., sane, sensible) don't try to open lines of communication with total strangers by writing them a series of disjointed, weird, cryptic messages.

From there on, it only got weirder—first several copies of the

book were sent to me in a package, and then, some months later, about 80 copies arrived at my office, and then came the bizarre claim that a bunch of copies “were found under a bridge” on my campus, and then books started arriving at various universities around the world, sent to people in certain disciplines that were vaguely associated with AI, biology, etc. And then there were the scissored-out words (super-weird!), and the taped-in letter, addressed to me. All of it was completely nuts. I could say much more about it all, but I don’t have the time.

I have a great deal of experience with people who are smart but unbalanced, people who think they have found the key to the universe, etc. It’s a sad thing, but there are many of them out there, and often they are extremely obsessive. This particular case was exceedingly transparent because it was so exceedingly obsessive.

Yes, there was a missing piece of the puzzle, Douglas Hofstadter was saying, but the recipients had gotten it wrong. They assumed the endeavor was brilliant and rational because they were brilliant and rational, and we tend to automatically assume that everybody else is basically just like us. But in fact the missing piece was that the author was a *crackpot*.

The book couldn’t be decoded because it was written by a *crackpot*. Hofstadter wrote:

“Being or Nothingness” was written (and published) by a psychologist (or possibly a psychiatrist) in Göteborg, Sweden, who prefers anonymity and thus goes by the pseudonym of “Joe K.”

“Petter Nordlund?” I thought.

Was Petter Nordlund the sole perpetrator? It seemed unlikely that such a successful man—a distinguished psychiatrist and a protein chemist, whatever that was, and an advisor to a biotech company specializing in therapeutic peptide discovery and development, whatever that was, was actually, in Hofstadter’s words, extremely

obsessive and unbalanced.

But at seven that evening I was face-to-face with him, and it became quickly obvious that he was, indeed, the culprit. He was tall, in his fifties, with an attractive face, the air of an academic. He wore a tweed jacket. He stood in his doorway with his wife, Lily, at his side. Immediately, I liked him. He had a big, kind, cryptic smile on his face, and he was wringing his hands like a man possessed. I frequently wrung my hands in much the same way. I couldn't help thinking that—in terms of getting much too obsessed about stupid things that didn't matter—Petter and I were probably peas in a pod.

"I'm surprised you're here," Petter said.

"I hope it isn't too unpleasant a surprise," I said.

There was a short silence.

"If you study *Being or Nothingness*," Petter said, "you will realize that you will never find out the author."

"I think I know the author," I said. "I think it's you."

"That's easy to . . ." Petter trailed off. "That's an easy guess," he said.

"Is it a correct guess?" I asked.

"Of course not," said Petter.

Petter (and Petter Nordlund is not his real name, nor is Lily her real name) bounced up and down on his feet a little. He was adopting the demeanor of a man who had received an unexpected visit from a neighbor just as something was boiling over on the stove. But I could tell his air of friendly distraction was a mask and underneath he was feeling quite overwhelmed by my arrival.

"Petter," I said. "Let me at least ask you this. Why were those particular people chosen to receive the book?"

At this, Petter let out a small gasp. His face lit up. It was as if I had just asked him the most wonderful question that could be asked.

"Well . . . !" he said.

"How would you know who got the book?" Lily quickly interrupted, a sharpness in her voice. "You only translated it."

And, with that, the moment passed. Petter's face once again took on the mask of polite distraction.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I really am sorry, but I'm going to have to end. . .

. My intention was just to say hi and go back. I have said more than I should. . . . You talk to my wife now.”

Petter backed away then, smiling, back into the shadows of his house, and Lily and I looked at each other.

“I’m going to Norway now,” she said. “Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” I said.

I flew back to London.

There was an e-mail waiting for me from Petter: “You seem like a nice man. The first step of the project will be over soon and it will be up to others to take it to the next level. Whether you will play a part I don’t know—but you will know. . . .”

“I would be glad to play a part if you give me some guidance as to how I might do so,” I wrote back.

“Well you see, that is the tricky part, knowing what to do,” he replied. “We call it life! Trust me, when your time comes you will know.”

Several weeks passed. My time didn’t come, or if it did come, I didn’t notice. Finally I telephoned Deborah and told her that I had solved the mystery.

I sat outside the Starbucks in the Brunswick Centre, Russell Square, Central London, and watched as Deborah turned the corner and walked fast toward me. She sat down and smiled.

“So?” she said.

“Well . . .” I said.

I recounted to her my exchanges with Levi Shand and Douglas Hofstadter, my meetings with Petter and Lily, and my subsequent e-mail correspondence. When I finished, she looked at me and said, “Is that *it*?”

“Yes!” I said. “It all happened because the author was—according to Hofstadter—a crackpot. Everyone was looking for the missing piece of the puzzle, and the missing piece turned out to be *that*.”

“Oh,” she said.

She looked disappointed.

“But it *isn't* disappointing,” I said. “Can't you see? It's incredibly interesting. Aren't you struck by how much *action* occurred simply because something went wrong with one man's brain? It's as if the rational world, your world, was a still pond and Petter's brain was a jagged rock thrown into it, creating odd ripples everywhere.”

The thought of this suddenly excited me hugely: Petter Nordlund's craziness had had a huge influence on the world. It caused intellectual examination, economic activity, and formed a kind of community. Disparate academics, scattered across continents, had become intrigued and paranoid and narcissistic because of it. They'd met on blogs and message boards and had debated for hours, forming conspiracy theories about shadowy Christian organizations, etc. One of them had felt motivated to rendezvous with me in a Costa Coffee. I'd flown to Sweden in an attempt to solve the mystery. And so on.

I thought about my own overanxious brain, my own sort of madness. Was it a more powerful engine in my life than my rationality? I remembered those psychologists who said psychopaths made the world go around. They meant it: society was, they claimed, an expression of that particular sort of madness.

Suddenly, madness was everywhere, and I was determined to learn about the impact it had on the way society evolves. I've always believed society to be a fundamentally rational thing, but what if it isn't? What if it is built on insanity?

I told Deborah all of this. She frowned.

“That *Being or Nothingness* thing,” she said. “Are you *sure* it was all because of one crazy Swedish man?”